

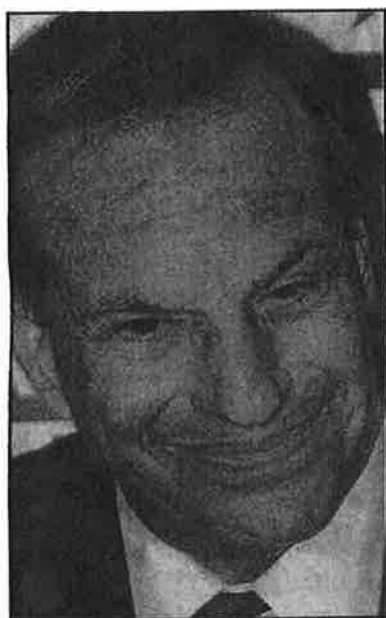
# THE STAR★NEWS

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SINCE 1882

## Fight continues for brain-injured troops

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ProPublica, and  
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FILE PHOTO

Rep. Bob Filner, who represents Chula Vista and National City, was one of 74 Congressional lawmakers signing a letter demanding treatment of brain-injured soldiers.

A bipartisan group of 74 lawmakers issued a letter recently demanding that the Pentagon's health plan cover a treatment for brain-injured soldiers known as cognitive rehabilitation therapy.

Rep. Bill Pascrell, D-N.J., and Rep. Todd Platts, R-Pa., the leaders of the Congressional Brain Injury Task Force, cited an investigation by ProPublica and NPR revealing that Tricare, an insurance-style plan covering soldiers and many veterans, had relied on a controversial study to avoid paying for the intensive and often expensive treatment.

"We hope that you share our concern that service members returning from the battlefield cannot wait to receive treatment for their injuries," the letter states. "It is our hope that there exists some contingency plan to provide cognitive rehabilitation for service members who are returning home today."

Official Pentagon figures show that nearly 200,000 troops have suffered traumatic brain injuries since 2001, though our investigation found evidence suggesting the true toll is far higher. Although the majority of soldiers recover from the most common form of head trauma, known as mild traumatic brain injury or concussion, some suffer lifelong mental difficulties, with trouble remembering words or following directions.

Pascrell and Platts first wrote a letter, also signed by scores of lawmakers, demanding that Tricare provide cognitive rehabilitation more than two years ago. In response, Tricare contracted a study that found insufficient evidence to justify providing the treatment.

In confidential reviews obtained by ProPublica and NPR, however, leading brain specialists blasted the study for ignoring evidence that the therapy helped, calling the study "deeply flawed." Top Pentagon health officials have also expressed concern about the high cost of the treatment, our reporting found.

Tricare has said that it will cover many aspects of cognitive rehabilitation, which typically includes physical and speech therapy. But soldiers, families and civilian clinics told us they have had trouble convincing Tricare to pick up the tab.

Tricare's stance stands in contrast to some major private insurance companies and some state Medicaid programs which cover the treatment. Expert panels convened by the Pentagon and the

Institutes of Medicine have also endorsed the therapy, which can cost more than \$50,000 per soldier.

Tricare has since commissioned the Institutes of Medicine

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**Rep. Bill Pascrell,  
Brain Injunct Task  
Force**

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to carry out another review of cognitive rehabilitation.

The review kicks off on Monday, Feb. 14, but is not expected to be complete until the end of this year.

Pascrell urged the Pentagon to react more

quickly to Congressional concerns.

"Clearly, the Pentagon is overdue in responding to our nation's wounded warriors," Pascrell said in a statement. "It's time to act."

Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., who signed the Feb. 4 letter, also has begun an investigation into the contract between Tricare and ECRI, a nonprofit firm that reviews medical treatments. ECRI has defended its study as scientifically sound and pledged to cooperate with the inquiry.

McCaskill chairs a Senate subcommittee on contracting oversight.